Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping

The GreenMan

Fall into spring: the garden year begins

The days are growing shorter and colder, and your mailbox is already full of winter catalogs. You might think your garden chores are finished for the season. Think again. The garden year actually begins with the misty, mellow days of autumn.

Spring only seems like the perfect time to resume work on your landscape. After all, garden centers are overflowing seductively with flowering plants, community groups plan Arbor Day celebrations, and all around, you can hear lawnmowers chomping on fast-growing grass.

However, planting trees and shrubs in the spring gives the plants very little time to overcome transplant shock and develop essential root systems before summer's scorching heat and dry conditions.

Fall is the ideal and appropriate time to plant and transplant trees, shrubs, and many perennials. In fact, it is important to get both broad-leaved and needle-leaved evergreens in the ground no later than mid-autumn. Species like holly, spruce, juniper, pine, fir and hemlock do not enter a dormant phase. Instead, they continue to transpire actively through their leaves during winter, which requires fully functioning root systems capable of taking water from the soil.

Planting as soon as possible allows roots to re-establish vital root hairs or fibers, which will begin supplying water. This is especially important for any plant with a root system that may have been damaged while being dug up for transplanting. Moreover, fall planting gives transplants two full growing seasons to become settled in before the dog days of summer. Water thoroughly after planting — and keep watering every week if dry conditions ensue.

Planting and transplanting deciduous trees and shrubs — like maples, dogwoods, lilacs, hydrangea, and viburnum — is best done after their leaves have fallen, signaling dormancy. Without the burden of supplying water and nutrients to leaves and branches, the tree can focus on growing new roots and preparing for blooming and leafing out in spring.

Fall is also the season for planting almost all hardy spring-flowering bulbs, such as tulips, scilla, crocuses,

hyacinths, and narcissus (which include daffodils and jonquils). Some gardeners prefer digging individual holes for each bulb, especially with more formal species like tulips. Prepare a hole two-and-one-half times deeper than the bulb's diameter. Before setting the bulb in place, toss in a handful of bonemeal or a dose of a "complete fertilizer," then fill in the hole.

A better approach for other bulbs might be to treat them like perennials. Prepare a well-drained planting area or bed by removing any weeds and debris and topping the area with four to six inches of compost. Incorporate the compost into the existing soil with a shovel, spade, or rototiller, working the amendment down into the top 10 or 12 inches of existing earth. Then insert the bulbs into the fluffy, organically-rich planting medium, preferably in groups or clumps — far more attractive than formal rows. Many gardeners use this type of preparation to "naturalize" bulbs like crocus and daffodils, thereby creating a flow of bright, nodding blooms between trees on a lawn, or down a hillside. Such plantings, also called "drifts," are often seen along parkways and in natural garden areas.

Rescue, renovate, or rethink your lawn during the fall as well. If you have not worked on it in autumn, anything you do in spring will be too little and too late. Start by investing in a simple seven dollar soil test through your local cooperative extension service office. The test will provide complete and sound directions for applying lime and fertilizer. Remember that autumn is the best, and sometimes the only, time to feed most turfgrasses.

Like trees and shrubs, grass plants continue to develop roots throughout winter. Feeding the roots and aiding their development now will ensure a healthier, more drought-tolerant lawn come spring and summer.

Lawns could also do with a breath of fresh air about now. Consider contracting with a landscaper to core aerate the lawn, or rent an aerator and do it yourself. The process, which normally costs less than $100 regardless of who does the work, will remove plugs from the soil and allow air to infiltrate deeper into the ground and stimulate grass roots. The small holes will improve drainage and help nutrients and organic matter — such as grass clippings and leaves - work their way into the soil horizon.

You also can add valuable organic matter to your lawn by mulching or grinding up leaves with a mower. Otherwise, rake up fallen leaves and other debris and add them to the compost pile to prevent the spread of fungal diseases during the wet winter months.

If your lawn has been a disappointment, cut it down to size (see the GreenMan publication *Honey, I shrunk the lawn!*). Autumn is the perfect time to create new planting beds. Either remove sod with a shovel or leave it in place and smother it with cardboard and newspaper*.

Apply six, eight, or more inches of mulch over the top of the bed and walk away. Worms and microorganisms will gobble up grass, roots and mulch while you sip hot cocoa indoors, leaving you with a brand-new planting area to play with in spring. Instead of complaining about your lawn, spend winter thumbing through colorful garden and seed catalogs.

*Instead of paper or cardboard, you can also use woven landscape fabric, which will cost more initially, but will also last longer and require a thinner (two to four inch) application of mulch, which could offset the additional cost if you purchase commercially-manufactured mulch. You will need to use a utility knife to cut out holes for your plants the following season.

The GreenMan Show is produced for County Cable Montgomery by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the Office of Public Information. It airs daily on Cable Channel 6 and can also be viewed on the Internet. For a complete schedule and online access, visit **www.greenmanshow.com.**

Joe Keyser is the author of the GreenMan column for the *Gazette Newspapers* in Maryland, and also host of The Greenman Show. A downloadable library of previous environmental articles. columns, and reviews are available online at greenman.askdep.com. Print copies are also available by contacting DEP at the following locations:

Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection
255 Rockville Pike, Suite 120
Rockville, MD 20850
240.777.7770 fax 240.777.7765
email: help@askdep.com
www.askdep.com